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A Thousand Days

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Kennedy's Thousand Days

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., **A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House**, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1965, XIV+1087 pp.

THE first and the last sentence of this voluminous book by an American historian are almost identical: "It all began in the cold"—"It all ended, as it began, in the cold."

What the author seems to mean here is the weather: both, in January 1961, when Kennedy assumed the Presidency, and in December 1963, when the last ceremony connected with the interment of the murdered President was over, the U.S. capital was severely hit by a winter cold so unusual for the area. But one can hardly get away from the impression that the author has put into this comparison a certain political sense. At any rate, it is in this symbolic way that the reader understands the pessimistic remark about the identity of the beginning and the end of the "thousand days".

Having become the host of the White House, Kennedy put forward his New Frontiers programme. He proclaimed the need for a substantial change in U.S. home and foreign policy, thereby denouncing the legacy left by his predecessor. "He was caustic about Eisenhower," the author writes. It is also noteworthy that in describing Eisenhower's predilection for golf, the new President found it appropriate to remark acidly that "all his golfing pals are rich men..." (p. 18).

However, after becoming head of the leading imperialist Power, Kennedy, too, carried on an imperialist policy, because he could not but line up on the monopolies dominating the country. In spite of his New Frontiers, he continued in the main the foreign policy line of his predecessors. At times he even gave this policy a more aggressive slant than Eisenhower had done: he sanctioned the armed attack on Cuba, and greatly intensified the arms race.

And yet in mid-1963, Kennedy, unlike other U.S. presidents, found courage enough also to criticise himself when he admitted, in his speech at the American University in Washington, that the United States was responsible for the cold war against the Soviet Union, and declared: "... I also believe that we must re-examine our own attitude" (p. 901). He even dared to take some practical steps to revise U.S. policy. It seems that this determination cost him his life, while his murder put an end to everything in the field of foreign policy that could really be associated with the New Frontiers.

The traditional aggressive bent of the "positions of strength" policy was fully restored in Washington. U.S. foreign policy once again began to follow the old course, continuing the dangerous tendencies of the 1940s and 1950s. And today, after the same tendencies have marked the beginning of U.S. armed gambles in South-East Asia and the Caribbean, the Kennedy Presidency looks like a short-lived but meaningful zigzag which preceded

what may be called the "straightening" of the line followed by the American aggressors.

The book under review is devoted to the complex and contradictory policy Kennedy conducted during his thousand days in the White House. The author, former Special Assistant to President Kennedy, says that his book consists of personal reminiscences. He gives a detailed and rather frank description of Kennedy's activity, especially his foreign policy, but without making any generalisations.

Schlesinger dwells at length on U.S. policy towards revolutionary Cuba, in particular, on the attack against Cuba made at the beginning of Kennedy's Presidency by Cuban anti-revolutionaries armed and equipped by the United States.

The author admits that the social order in Cuba under the Batista dictatorship, i.e., prior to the 1959 revolution, was disgraceful. Describing his personal impressions of life in the island under U.S. rule, Schlesinger writes about Havana as follows: "I was... appalled by the way that lovely city was being debased into a giant casino and brothel for American businessmen.... One wondered how any Cuban—on the basis of this evidence—could regard the United States with anything but hatred" (p. 173). As for revolutionary Cuba, the author notes that it has abolished corruption and is educating and inspiring its people (p. 223). Coming from a former adviser to Kennedy these are valuable admissions.

When dealing with the reasons why the U.S. President in April 1961 agreed to the armed gamble against Cuba, Schlesinger throws light on the side scenes of U.S. foreign policy which is under the growing ominous influence of the C.I.A. and the Pentagon. Then, in an attempt to belittle the role of the host of the White House, he tries to present things as if Kennedy was compelled to agree to the gamble, which was conceived by the Eisenhower Administration, and thus became "a prisoner of events" (p. 256).

But the facts cited by the author show that as far back as November 29, 1960, the President-elect was informed by Allen Dulles, the then C.I.A. leader, on the C.I.A. plans for invading Cuba. "Kennedy listened with attention," Schlesinger writes, "then told Dulles to carry the work forward" (p. 233). That was exactly what the C.I.A. chief wanted, and the preparation for the aggression continued at a greater pace.

Subsequently, the author writes, Allen Dulles succeeded in convincing Kennedy that should the plan for invading Cuba be abandoned, the hundreds of Cuban counter-revolutionaries trained for the purpose at the secret C.I.A. bases in Guatemala would all the same tell the world what they were being trained for. And it has to be noted that this argument influenced Kennedy. Before finally sanctioning the invasion of Cuba, he said: "If we have to get rid of these 800 men [trained in Guatemala alone.—*G.A.*], it is much better to dump them in Cuba..." (p. 257).

Schlesinger testifies that the President was also in no small measure influenced by the falsified C.I.A. data on the situation in Cuba. According to this "information" the local population was eager to see the self-invited guests: former landowners and Batista policemen, officers and profiteers craving for the return of the lands, wealth and privileges they were bereft of by the revolution.

The author writes that among the influential U.S. political leaders, only Chester Bowles, Under-Secretary of State, and Senator William Fulbright, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, were clearly opposed to the armed intervention in Cuba, while State Secretary Dean Rusk adopted an evasive position which, in fact, was contributive to the invasion. He, for instance, filed away Bowles's special memorandum opposing the intervention, without even showing it to Kennedy (pp. 250-251).

The result of this first foreign policy act by the new President is well enough known. The counter-revolutionary band landed on the Cuban coast was routed and nearly all the invaders were taken prisoner. The failure of this gamble cost Allen Dulles the post of C.I.A. Director, from which he was removed shortly after. In his talk with Schlesinger, Kennedy said that he had made a mistake in keeping Dulles in this post when forming his Administration, and that "Bobby (Kennedy's brother Robert) should be in C.I.A." (p. 276).

The part of the book which deals with Kennedy's attitude towards the Vietnamese problem is of considerable and in no way theoretical interest.

After the first acquaintance with confidential documents on the situation in South Viet-Nam, President Kennedy declared: "This is the worst yet" and added: "... Ike never briefed me about Vietnam" (p. 320). According to the author, Kennedy believed that to suppress the national-liberation movement in Viet-Nam by force of arms was a senseless idea: "Without the support of the native population there is no hope of success in any of the countries of Southeast Asia," Kennedy said (p. 321).

Schlesinger cites another statement by Kennedy, which today, in the light of the present escalation of the dirty American war in Viet-Nam, is particularly topical. "I am frankly of the belief," Kennedy emphasised in 1954, when still a Senator, "that no amount of American assistance in Indochina can conquer... 'an enemy of the people' which has the sympathy and... support of the people...." He warned that "for the United States to intervene unilaterally and to send troops into the most difficult terrain in the world... would mean that we would face a situation which would be far more difficult than even what we encountered in Korea" (p. 322).

It has to be noted that it was precisely in connection with the events in Indochina that not only President Kennedy but his predecessor Eisenhower, too, pointed out the political aspects of imperialist wars against the national-liberation movement in the former colonies and the importance of "sympathy and support of the people".

On January 19, 1961, Kennedy had a talk with Eisenhower, in which the latter expressed his concern over the fact that "communist soldiers [fighters representing the national-liberation movement.—*G.A.*] always seemed to

have better morale than the soldiers 'representing the democratic forces'", i.e., colonialist forces. "Evidently," the President leaving the White House added in distress, "there was something about the 'communist philosophy' which gave their supporters 'a certain inspiration and a certain dedication'" (p. 163).

This notwithstanding, during their meeting with Kennedy, Eisenhower and Herter, his State Secretary at that time, were by no means inclined to abandon the plans for U.S. armed intervention in Laos, saying "that Laos was the key to all Southeast Asia" *(ibid.)*. Similarly, Kennedy's sensible arguments about the importance of the "sympathy and support of the people" did not prevent him, when he became President, from continuing to send American military "advisers" to Viet-Nam to increase their contingent to 16,000 (p. 998).

Kennedy was more realistic and consistent, especially in the third year of his Presidency, in appraising the relation of forces between the United States and the Soviet Union, and in approaching the problem of relations with the U.S.S.R.

Since the termination of the Second World War, the "positions of strength" doctrine, proclaimed by Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles, has been prevalent and is still prevalent in Washington. The author believes that such U.S. leaders as the late Adlai Stevenson, former U.S. Representative in the United Nations, George Kennan, former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, the above-mentioned Chester Bowles and William Fulbright, and Mike Mansfield, now leader of the Democratic majority in the Senate, were to one extent or another opposed to such "doctrines". From the end of the 1950s, they have called on official Washington to show more flexibility in the sphere of foreign policy and to make a soberer assessment of the relation of forces and also of the changes occurring in the world.

Schlesinger is of the opinion that Kennedy was clearly aligned with the position of this group of political leaders (p. 300). He often emphasised the danger of nuclear war for the United States and believed that Washington should strive "to prevent direct confrontations between Russian and American power" (p. 348), and that in defending its immediate national interests it should renounce the "crusades" against Communism advocated by John Foster Dulles and his followers (pp. 298-299).

But, as repeatedly pointed out in the book, there are numerous forces in the United States hindering any step to improve relations with the Soviet Union. The author emphasises that the C.I.A. and the Pentagon and even the State Department invariably sabotaged any initiative in this direction. "The Joint Chiefs of Staff ... opposed general and complete disarmament...", Schlesinger notes (p. 474). Kennedy admitted that "disarmament did not seem a popular issue in the United States" (p. 478). Incidentally, the author writes, he himself "looked to disarmament primarily as a measure of political warfare" and he "well understood the 'propaganda'" importance of this problem (p. 479).

However, even those few and very irresolute steps Kennedy made to ease international tension, including the very fact of his speech at the American University, which, the author says, was "capable of revolutionising the whole American view of the cold war" (p. 901), were sufficient to unite against him the various forces of extreme reaction, the brass hats, the arms manufacturers, the C.I.A. and the circles close to intelligence. Schlesinger writes about it with discretion. He points out, nevertheless, that "in the two years after November 1961, the Secret Service investigated thirty-four threats against the President's life from the state of Texas alone" (p. 756). Even this scant information is sufficient to reveal the political sense of the shot in Dallas, its consequences and many other things in subsequent world developments.

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